

The Canterbury Catch Club - a performance of class

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning, thank you all for coming, especially at this early hour on a Friday morning, and can I say a special thank you to the organisers of this wonderful conference in this beautiful city for inviting me to come and talk, and for giving me chocolates even before I'd done so. And my subject for the next 40 minutes or so is a fascinating little bit of the history of another beautiful city: my home town of Canterbury.

Perhaps I should explain that my main research interests centre on a group of musicians - that's to say, the several generations of singers who made up the various incarnations of that group between about 1760 and 1900. Typically for semi-professional singers, they found themselves moving in a variety of musical and social circles, ranging from the one created by this large building here to a very different one in a pub nearby. But Antonio did say I could talk about anything I wanted, so although I start with a city and a cathedral, I do end up in something fit for inclusion in a Conference concerned with the broadly-defined salon. Honestly.

Perhaps, this far from home, I should take a couple of minutes to introduce the city. A sense of time and place is particularly important for my topic, I think, so: here [\[click\]](#) is a map of England, appropriately from the early 19th century, and here [\[click\]](#) in the bottom south-east corner of our tiny island, about 60 miles from London [\[click\]](#), is Canterbury [\[click for white circle\]](#). These days, you'll

probably fly into London, which is quite a lot bigger now, but in the early 1800s you were more likely to sail to Dover [\[click for white circle\]](#) and take a coach from there. Canterbury would have been on the way to the capital: here [\[click\]](#) is a map of the city at about the same time: a small provincial city of about 9,000 souls whose cathedral happened to be the centre of Anglican Christendom. William Gostling's *Walk Around the City of Canterbury* in 1779 - one of the earliest tour guides to the city ever produced - describes it thus [\[click for Gostling North View\]](#): "It is seated in a pleasant valley, about a mile wide, between hills of moderate height, with fine springs rising from them." Edward Hasted's *History of Canterbury* (1801) finds the people just as pleasant: "Many gentlemen of fortune and genteel families reside in it, especially within the precincts of the cathedral." Canterbury survived the worst blights of the Industrial Revolution which saw the massive growth of other cities, especially in the north of the country, and for good reason: Canterbury's economy revolved around agriculture, and hops [\[click for pics\]](#) were an important part of it. In 1778 the county of Kent grew over half the nation's hops. That many hops make a lot of beer [\[click\]](#). In 1800 the city boasted 100 pubs [\[click for pic of pub\]](#).

But you probably don't think of beer when you think of Canterbury. You might think of an Archbishop, especially a dead one. Here [\[click\]](#) is an image that may spring to mind: Thomas a Becket, 40th Archbishop of Canterbury, being slaughtered in 1170 by four knights who thought they were doing King Henry II a favour by getting rid of a "troublesome priest". This was obviously very unfortunate for Thomas, but fantastically good for Canterbury's tourist trade: over the next few hundred years, thousands upon thousands of pilgrims inspired one of the greatest works of English Literature [\[click\]](#): *The Canterbury Tales*, by

Geoffrey Chaucer - a wonderful compendium of keenly observed stories - and ensured that the Benedictine monks who cared for Becket's remains would find themselves in receipt of vast wealth, as rich pilgrims prayed to the saint to bless them. The result was the building we now call Canterbury Cathedral [\[click\]](#), partly thanks to Henry VIII, who is part of the Grand Narrative I will skip over; here it is in a print of 1655.

Hooray, you think; we're about to meet some musicians. Alas, no, not yet. We have to wait a few years, because 1655 is right in the middle of the period we call the Commonwealth. Yes, in 1642 we got rid of our monarchy. For a while. Oliver Cromwell and his miserable Puritans ruled for nearly 20 years, and I can't resist showing you this painting [\[click\]](#) from 1657, which is in a private collection and has only been exhibited twice in the last 80 years, so you can see something of the effect they had on music in the cathedral. It shows Canterbury Cathedral quire, and thanks to the Puritans, it's empty: no altar, no decorations - and [\[click for additional text\]](#) no choir. The Puritans didn't approve of sacred music, so for nearly 20 years there was no singing here. Worse, they smashed up anything they regarded as idolatrous. This included lots of statues and a distressing amount of stained glass. Your attention is caught by the figures in the centre, at a table [\[click for white circle\]](#), and by the man clambering over the pews [\[click for white circle\]](#) to get at some stonework - we assume, to wreck it. It's easy to miss the little figures up in the galleries [\[click for white circles\]](#), smashing away at glass and stone.

Good news: in 1660 the Puritans were banished, the monarchy was restored [\[click for Charles II\]](#) (probably because everybody hated the miserable Puritans),

and cathedral choirs re-formed with remarkable speed to resume their singing, almost as if nothing had happened to interrupt them for nearly two decades. Once again, the choir looked more like its old self [\[click for image from DIH book\]](#). Here it is, with singers. So: what had those singers been doing for 20 years? Had they been practising in secret for all that time, just in case they might be recalled?

Well, sort of. I doubt they would have been singing any of the sacred repertoire, but it is an absolute certainty that they would have been singing *something*. We know, very well, how popular singing was as a social pastime for the English drinking classes (that includes everybody): ale-houses, inns, taverns (all of which we nowadays simply call pubs), meetings and dinners resounded with the noise of voices raised in song [\[click for a pic\]](#). William Thackeray, writing in the later 19th century, described this very well: “Singing after dinner and supper was the universal fashion of the day. You may fancy all England sounding with choruses, some ribald, some harmless, but all occasioning the consumption of an awful lot of fermented liquor.”¹ In other words, alcohol. This quote actually comes from a brief biography of King George IV who, when he was a youthful Prince of Wales [\[click for Geo IV as PoW\]](#), was well known for joining in with this sort of thing. For Thackeray, singing and drinking went together, and were part of the man’s inevitably sad fate:

It was an unlucky thing for this doomed one, and tending to lead him yet farther on the road to [perdition], that, besides being lovely, so that women were fascinated by him; and heir [to the throne], so that all the world flattered him; he should have a beautiful voice, which led him directly to drink.

¹ Thackeray, W.M, *The Four Georges*, Vol 23 of *The Works...* (Smith, Elder & Co., Waterloo Place, London, 1899) p. 96.

It wasn't just the very top end of society [\[click for pic\]](#): up and down the land, in ale-houses, at dinners, at sociable gatherings of all kinds, men (mostly) were singing songs to each other.

So what, you ask, were they singing? Well, we know the likely repertoire really surprisingly well. There was a particular genre of music which had been popular in England since at least the 13th century, if not earlier. I'm talking about the Catch [\[click for pic of original 'Now We Are Met'\]](#). Apologies if you already know this, by the way; I'll be brief. The most famous use of the word is to be found in Shakespeare, when, in *Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 3, Sir Toby Belch greets the arrival of the Fool with a cheerful "Welcome, ass. Now let's have a catch." I did write an explanation but honestly, I think if I just play this example by Samuel Webbe you'll see perfectly clearly how a catch works [\[click for audio\]](#). Now this one was perfectly innocent, but the catch has long had a reputation for being very rude: in 1795 one William Jackson described them as pieces of music which "when quartered, have three parts obscenity and one part music".² This reputation still holds: nowadays, that's what everybody thinks about the catch, and the visual images we find depicting men singing catches contribute to this dreadful reputation. True, most of them are caricatures, and caricaturists never take anything seriously, but the fact that serious visual representations are so scarce (I mean, I haven't found any yet) would suggest that catch singing was not regarded as a fit subject for a serious artist. Here are a few examples to show you what I mean [\[click for various pics\]](#). You'll notice recurring features.

² William Jackson, *Letters on Various Subjects: On Catches*, 3rd edn. (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1795), p. 61-71 in <<https://archive.org/details/thirtylettersonv00jack>> [accessed 8th Feb 2016].

Drink is always to be seen. Whether the setting seems to be a private house, an ale-house, or a sociable meeting gathered for some reason, drink is usually to hand. Inebriated or not, they all seem to be able to sing, or they're making a good show of it, and you can be sure that our friends the cathedral singers were in amongst them. In fact, the reputation of cathedral singers was every bit as bad as the reputation of the catches they sang in the pub. The best-known description comes from a silly book of 1628, written by a Church of England clergyman called John Earle: *Microcosmographie, or, A Piece of the World Discovered; in Essays and Characters*. His verbal caricature No. 30 is called *The Common Singing Men In Cathedral Churches*, and he has this to say about them

[\[click for text\]:](#)

[They] are a bad society and yet a company of good fellows, that roar deep in the Quire, deeper in the Tavern. Their pastime or recreation is prayers, their exercise drinking, yet herein so religiously addicted that they serve God [most often] when they are drunk. Their gowns are laced commonly with streamings of ale. Their skill in melody makes them the better companions abroad, and their anthems abler to sing catches.

So now we know what the cathedral singers were doing while the choirs were disbanded under the Puritans.

Before we leave the catch, let's take a closer look at one which has its own delightful visual representation. Here [\[click for pic of Une Chansonnette\]](#) is a print of about 1784 representing a lively household gathering, apparently singing a catch by William Bates called "The Comical Fellows" - the text is at the bottom. At a conference in Scotland last year, the much-revered Simon McVeigh was one of the keynote speakers. "Let's remember the music," he said, concerned that musicology was in danger of forgetting what it was supposed to have been talking about. With this advice in mind, I got a few of my mates from

the cathedral choir together and persuaded them to sing this remarkably forgettable little piece. Here it is, specially, hastily, and cheaply recorded for this conference: our performance of this image [\[click for video\]](#).

There's a companion print to "Une Chansonnette", called "A Glee - Une Allegresse" [\[click for pic\]](#); here it is. Yes, you can probably guess what's coming, but let me try and prepare you, by introducing you properly to the English glee. It is an altogether more serious piece of music than its disreputable cousin, the catch: child of the madrigal and father of the English part-song, it is an unaccompanied secular piece intended for three, four or five (very occasionally more) solo voices, the top voice usually being the distinctive, male, counter-tenor. This is one of the things which clearly suggests a strong connection with English cathedral music. Note that the glee was *not* usually a piece intended for alcohol-fuelled participation; it expected an audience, and its subject-matter could be very serious indeed. Lots of songs about death, love, patriotism, etc., setting some fine English poetry, including Shakespeare, Milton, and Spencer. Though, yes, quite a few are about drinking, as you will hear. For the 20th-century English composer Vaughan Williams, the glee was an important musical genre:

The 18th century, undistinguished as it undoubtedly was in the annals of English music - oppressed as it was by the foreign fashionable domination of Italian operas and singers - was yet responsible for two exclusively English art forms - forces small in scope, and [\[click for text\]](#) not of heroic build, but it was just in such forms as these that the English character found its true utterance; directly it went further it began to lose itself. One of these was the glee...

He doesn't make any such grand claims for the catch, which probably shouldn't surprise us. But he clearly wants us to take the glee seriously.

Now, this is a little bit difficult, given the pictures I'm showing you at the moment. It doesn't *look* very serious, does it? It's even more difficult to take the glee seriously when you know that an awful lot of them are actually about singing and drinking, and the combination of the two. The glee in this picture is an example. Here it is, being "sung" by me and my fellow lay clerks: a glee, all about drinking, by Thomas Arne: "Which is the Properest Day to Drink?" [\[click for video of "Une Allegresse"\]](#).

So, how seriously can we, honestly, take the glee? Well, whatever you think of the music and its visual representation so far, one thing is clear: it was obviously important as a social, bonding experience. I return to this point at the end of this paper, but for now let's try and see past the grotesquery of the caricatures and get to the heart of the matter: however drunk they were, however good or bad the music, however competent the performance, what we can see is an intensely convivial experience. They look as if they're having a good time. They must have been, or this behaviour would not have developed from the shallow seed-bed of the drinking-houses to become a very deep-rooted associational activity in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Catch Clubs, Glee Clubs, Catch and Glee Clubs, Harmonic Societies - all sprang up from the late eighteenth century onwards. The London Catch Club (more of that in a minute) started in 1762, and everywhere else in Britain followed their lead. Socially, it became a very serious thing. Musically, the clubs had higher aspirations, too: Canterbury's Catch Club paid local musicians to play and sing a complete evening's concert, as we shall see. Other clubs' programmes make it clear that professional gentlemen were hired to perform the more demanding glees - or at least made "honorary

members". But considering how much they'd all had to drink in the course of an evening (and we do have some evidence for that, too), it seems to me that an account given by Charles Dickens is probably close to the truth.

Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* [\[click for pic of TP\]](#) were his first published work. Serialised in the mid-1830s, one of the very first shows us 'London By Night'. That chapter ends with the following:

One o'clock [in the morning - this is night-time, remember]! Cabs, hackney-coaches [\[click for pic\]](#), carriages, and theatre omnibuses roll swiftly by... The more musical portion of the public go to some harmonic meeting. Let us follow them thither for a few moments ...

In a lofty room [\[click for Cruikshank illustration\]](#) of spacious dimensions are seated some eighty or a hundred guests knocking little pewter tankards on the tables, and hammering away with the handles of their knives. They are applauding a glee, which has just been performed by the three "professional gentlemen" at the top of the centre table, one of whom is in the chair - a little pompous man with a bald head just emerging from the collar of his green coat.

"Pray give your orders, gen'l'm'n - pray give your orders," says a pale-faced man with a red head; and demands for gin, and brandy, and pints of stout, and cigars, are vociferously made from all parts of the room. ...

A little round-faced man, with white stockings and shoes, thinks he's a comedian; after a great deal of coughing, [he] sings a comic song [\[click for pics of Cork Leg & Steam Arm\]](#), with a fal-de-ral-tol-de-rol chorus at the end of every verse, much longer than the verse itself. It is received with unbounded applause, after which the little pompous man says "Gentlemen, we will attempt a glee, if you please." This announcement calls forth tremendous excitement, and the livelier gentlemen celebrate by knocking one or two beer glasses off the tables - a witty trick; but one which causes some debate when payment for the damage is demanded by the waiter.

Scenes like these are continued until three or four o'clock in the morning; but we make our bow, and drop the curtain.

This is a disorderly scene, is it not? It's certainly a far cry from the polite salons depicted in the Jane Austen novels of the period [\[click for JA salon pic\]](#). Here I am, trying to tell you that the glee, at least, should be taken seriously, but so far I haven't given you much evidence to do so. Well, prepare yourselves: the tone is about to change. Look at, and listen to, this [\[click for Webbe images and audio of 1st section\]](#).

That's a much more sombre sort of sound, isn't it? The glee was intended to be capable of powerful expression. "The music of the glee," writes Emanuel Rubin, "was intended to encapsulate the meaning of the text in a way that would appeal to the *literary* listener." The words were important - remember the book illustrated by Rowlandson [\[click\]](#) was a collection of lyrics - very common, this - gathered in a book for their literary merit, even if the conviviality in the drawing seems to subvert this somewhat. As you may have noticed, that glee by Samuel Webbe won a prize in 1772. The 'prize' in this context is one of those awarded by the Noblemen and Gentlemen's Catch Club of London - or the 'Nobs and Gents' as it came to be called, or simply, The Catch Club - who, from 1763, two years after they were founded, began to award prizes in four categories: 'serious' glee, 'cheerful' glee, catch and canon. Each medal [\[click for medal pics\]](#) was worth 10 guineas - very roughly, £1,000 today, or 70,000 RUB. In the course of a long and distinguished career, Samuel Webbe won 27 of them. This is a substantial example of artistic patronage, and the London Club kept it up for 30 years - which gives you some idea how very wealthy their members were. There was an acute awareness that this was a distinctively nationalistic endeavour - and that it was at odds with the growing supremacy of instrumental music to be found across the English Channel on the European mainland. Rubin

is quick to point out that that the glee represents a very English “left turn when the rest of the parade had turned right” and wonders why. In our grim post-EU-referendum climate, it’s tempting simply to dismiss it as typical bloody-minded insularity and turn to more cheerful topics, but we should follow his lead and briefly consider the musical and literary reasons for the undoubted popularity of the glee.

Quite simply, there has rarely been a period of British musical history when composers were more obsessed with the matter of finding appropriate musical expression for a text. Anxious not only to reflect the surface expression of the words, they sought to express the ‘sentiment’ of the poetry - and in the late eighteenth century, that word had far deeper resonance than its feeble modern counterpart. ‘Sentiment’, in this period, embodied a response which was as much intellectual as emotional. In support of these rather grand claims, let me play you *Discord* in its entirety. I think it’s an excellent little example of what the serious glee was trying to do. You have a copy. To words by Webbe himself, a slow introduction in a foreboding F minor grimly depicts the "dire sister of the slaught'ring power" (War itself, we would guess) and its inexorable growth, in powerful homophony. A second, faster section vividly portrays the dread result: "she stalks on earth and shakes the world around" in lively, sinewy counterpoint. The antidote, of course, in a lilting, final, triple-time section in the tonic major, is the "lovely peace" with which the work ends; "soft ease" prevails, and the only reminder of what had preceded it is heard in the momentary darkness of a chromatic secondary dominant 7th just before the final cadence, when an emphatic, graceful, double suspension banishes such clouds for ever [\[click for audio\]](#).

Now just as that music was a far cry from the cheerful idiocy of the earlier pieces I played you, so too is this next image a clear departure from what has gone before. Recall the grotesque caricatures you've seen, and consider this next picture in that context. I think you'll agree it's a startling contrast. Here, Ladies and Gentlemen - at last - is the Canterbury Catch Club, immortalised in a splendid lithograph dating from 1826 [\[click for pic of CCC\]](#).

Let's soak up the atmosphere for a minute. You may remember Dickens' description of the room in which his 'Harmonic Society' met. This too, is 'a lofty room of spacious dimensions', but there the resemblance ends. Gone is the cheerful anarchy of drunken conviviality [\[click for Cruikshank/Dickens pic a 2nd time\]](#). This image has much more in common with this one [\[click for pic\]](#), showing the Library of the Reform Club, in London. Thackeray was a member here. Add a few more people, and an orchestra at the back, and this [\[click to remove pic\]](#) is what you get. Look closely. What a fine chandelier! What splendid portraits on the walls, firmly establishing the Club's musical credentials: Arcangelo Corelli on the left, and St Cecilia, no less, over on the right, seated at her organ with a verse from Dryden hovering and a couple of cherubs to establish divinity, and classical credentials, should that be necessary. We still have those - two of them [\[click\]](#) are on permanent display in Canterbury City Library. That lovely lady in the foreground is my wife Sonia, brightening up my presentation considerably and helpfully giving a sense of scale to make clear that these were fairly serious paintings. The lower painting, [\[click\]](#) of the mild-mannered-looking gentleman with a violin, is a portrait of the Musical Director of the Club - yes, they were that serious about it - one Thomas Goodban; you'll

hear more about him later. The other painting, [\[click\]](#) immediately next to Sonia, is that picture of Saint Cecilia [\[click to go back to the CCC print\]](#). Splendid statuary - though it might be *trompe l'oeil*. Note the enscrolled motto in huge letters on the wall: "Harmony and Unanimity", it says: what a noble sentiment! Look at the size of that orchestra, dimly visible at the back there (they'd rebuilt the room to accommodate them, you know): 25 players in all. This must be a wealthy club, to be able to afford such a generous ensemble, must it not? And, in the foreground, look at those sophisticated citizens who inhabit this social space! Count them: 95 members, all - obviously - affluent, cultured, literate and sensitive to the finer things of life: fine ale and tobacco, snuff, good company, thoughtful meditation. Some of them even look as if they might be listening to the music. This Club is claiming your serious consideration.

We have a lot of evidence in support of that claim. This is the only image we have of the Club, but there's a library-load of other sources [\[click\]](#): 3,000 pieces of vocal music, in 70 volumes, and [\[click\]](#) scores and parts for 700 instrumental works; portraits [\[click\]](#) of club committee members; Minutes Books [\[click\]](#), recording in intricate detail the deliberations of the committee; concert records [\[click\]](#) for ten years from 1825-1835, and then another four years from 1857-61. And other things, including an ivory gavel [\[click\]](#); here [\[produce gavel\]](#) is a slightly smaller replica. The room shown here, in which they met for over 50 years, still survives in the city (it's nowhere near as big, mind). All this evidence tells us very clearly that the club, founded in 1779, lasted eighty-four years before finally giving up. Throughout that time, it sustained an astonishing programme of 30 concerts, each Wednesday evening of the winter months. Here's an example [\[click to go back to concert records\]](#): about two hours of

music including glees, overtures, solo songs and instrumental pieces, and on the first and last nights of the season, the National Anthem to finish. All that is fact. This was a serious club. And of course, there is this print. We know a lot about this: Mr Henry Ward, bookseller and stationer, commissioned it - there he is in the picture [\[click for white arrow\]](#) offering snuff to the gentleman opposite him. And for a long time it has been accompanied by a slightly puzzling sketch identifying 42 of the people in the picture [\[click\]](#). The only attribution I've been able to find for this dates from 1943 and claims to have been done by the grandson of gentleman number 21, Mr T. T. Delasaux, Coroner. This is a bit tenuous, but other records corroborate a lot of the information, so I think it's safe to take it as evidence [\[click to remove\]](#).

So far, so good, but there are a few problems with this picture. [\[click\]](#) The room would have been full of smoke from all those pipes, for a start. [\[click\]](#) We know that women were actually present at the concerts, but they're not in the picture - in fact, women performers (yes, they sang) were better paid than the men. [\[click\]](#) We know from the Minutes Books that the Committee had endless arguments with the Orchestra (no harmony and unanimity there, I can tell you, but more of that in a moment). [\[click\]](#) There are even little jokes in the picture - for instance, the fact that the man on the right of the chap offering snuff is actually the artist himself, Thomas Mann Baynes, of whom you will never have heard. [\[click\]](#) You must have noticed that we can't see the musicians very clearly at all - remember, this was supposed to be a musical club. [\[click\]](#) We know that the musical repertoire was mostly pretty light-hearted stuff, especially the pieces which had a rumbustious chorus everyone could join in with. Even the instrumental music was on the lighter side of the classical

repertoire: the Overture was by far the most popular such item, and remember that the rhetoric of an overture relies on extravagant gesture rather than reasoned argument. [\[click\]](#) Most problematic of all, no-one is actually singing anything, in this picture. We have to turn to a contemporary account to find out when the catches probably happened. Given the reference to the lack of a local constabulary, it seems to describe a club evening from around the early 1830s - only a few years, perhaps, after the print was drawn:

The club was renowned throughout England for its music and its gentlemanly atmosphere; visitors were numerous, Army officers, country gentry, and commercial travellers ... When the program was concluded the early birds retired, and free and easy singing followed, the mirth growing fast and furious till the small hours. Our grandfathers made a night, and often, too, a morning of it.

So it becomes clear that this picture is being very selective in what it chooses to show us. Why? Why does the club choose to represent itself in such a relatively sombre fashion? Especially in such an idealised manner - why the trappings of portraiture, statuary, enscrolled motto, and chandelier? Are all those high collars, pipes, glasses and top hats absolutely necessary? And - given the importance of vocal music in the concert records and the surviving music archive - why not include the singers? In fact, the similarity with an altogether more serious painting - of only 6 years previously, in 1820 - is striking: here [\[click for pic\]](#) is Asher Durand's representation of the signing of the American Declaration of Independence! Admittedly, there's no smoking or drinking to be seen, but the rows of gentlemen and the serious faces are the same. In short [\[click to return to CCC\]](#), why is the Catch Club membership putting on such a show of civic good behaviour?

Well, there's a clue in that Reform Club picture I showed earlier [\[click\]](#). It reminds us that all this was very self-consciously modelled (as were hundreds of others up and down the country) on the great-granddaddy of them all, the London Noblemen and Gentlemen's Catch Club I mentioned. Canterbury may not have had the aristocratic nobility of London (only 22 of the 42 named members qualified, by owning property, for the vote) but it wanted to imitate its social superiors. Charles Dickens offers a clue. In one of those *Sketches by Boz* he muses upon the sad disappearance of May Day traditions such as dancing round a Maypole [\[click\]](#). "Well; many years ago," he says, "we began to be a steady and matter-of-fact sort of people, and dancing in spring being beneath our dignity we gave it up..." [\[click\]](#).³ The Catch Club was an institution born of the 18th century - the Georgian period of English history - and as the historian Vic Gatrell points out, Georgian manners, tastes and behaviour happily embraced the lewd and lascivious at all levels of society.⁴ For Gatrell, as for Dickens, the 19th century brought about a seismic shift in manners and outward morals which reflected the intellectual developments in science and technology, in secular scholarship, and in the arguments for political and social reform. The consequent doubt as to the continuity of the old order encouraged, in the middle classes, a rush to respectability in which bourgeois identity was "affirmed and remoralised".

We are talking, of course, about Class [\[click for Cruikshank Beehive\]](#). For the British, Class is a difficult subject. Books have been written about it, and they all agree that yes, it is a difficult subject, if nothing else. It's difficult because

³ Ibid., p. 157

⁴ Ibid., p. 17

your occupation is only one clue to your class. For the British, other clues probably matter more: your taste in clothes, books, and music; your choice of holiday destination and activities; your accent; your choice of newspaper; certainly, the school you went to, and then the university (back home, we are keenly aware that our new Prime Minister, Teresa May, is a grammar-school girl - that's to say, she attended a selective state school, rather than the private education of, for example, Eton-educated David Cameron - though you need to know that grammar schools are really nothing more than the invention of a ruling elite to give the illusion of access to power to people not of the right class. But I digress... How you stand at cocktail parties; what sports you follow or pursue; everything, really, including the way you hold your tea-cup, tell a fellow-Brit what class you really are.

Now you can probably understand slightly better why, for the middle class of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, climbing the social ladder [\[click for Cruikshank Quality Ladder\]](#) was a tough and perilous challenge. As political reform gathered momentum, while trade and commerce created a wealthier commercial sector, social ambitions flourished. It wasn't easy. In a low-level commercial world which depended on a network of credit, the threat of imprisonment for debt was ever-present. We see this in the Cathedral records: in 1833 one of the Cathedral singers has to explain to the authorities that he couldn't sing at the daily services because he was in prison for debt. He still got dismissed. Appearances mattered, and Catch Club membership was visible evidence which validated a social position. Here is a safe place in which the self-selecting membership could rehearse and perform their social status with a greater sense of security. It was important to be seen - appropriately dressed

and behaving decorously, as befitted the social status to which you aspired - at this sort of association. As Peter Clarke has pointed out, the 18th and 19th centuries were the age of association. And let's remember it wasn't simply a matter of a social position; a glance at some of the occupations of members identified in the print makes clear that this gathering of people was a nexus of economic activity. We can read the print as a highly-charged political statement, affirming an emerging social and political identity. We glimpse something of the tension in the Club committee's treatment of the Orchestra [\[click for Orchestra pic\]](#), who were, as far as the committee were concerned, merely paid artisans of a lower social class. The Minutes Books give us fascinating glimpses of the carefully-calibrated treatment of the musicians. In 1813, the President is to choose his deputies and the committee - "to consist of 15 members *and those Members of the Orchestra who do NOT receive any pay for their services*". If you gave your service for free, you were a Gentleman, with a capital 'G'. As time goes on, though, such gentlemen seem to play less and less, so that the members of the orchestra are treated more and more like the paid servants of the Club. The committee grapples with thorny questions such as where the players might sit so they could watch when not performing (answer: at an unwanted table by the door of the Ladies' Room⁵), whether they should applaud other performers from their positions in the orchestra (no, they shouldn't⁶), or whether a member of the Orchestra should be allowed to be a member of the Club (again, no⁷). During the Orchestra Mutiny of 1843 - they actually refused to play - one newspaper correspondent

⁵ Catch Club Minutes, Nov 15, 1841

⁶ Ibid., Feb 8, 1841

⁷ Ibid., Sept. 17, 1833

contemptuously reminded the players that they were only worth what anyone was prepared to pay them: when funds are low, “they must, of course, receive a smaller remuneration for their services,” he said.⁸ Worst of all, that mild-mannered young man [\[click\]](#) you met earlier - Thomas Goodban, the Musical Director of the Club - found himself excluded from the Committee in 1843, after forty years’ service. Back in 1819, they’d given him a silver bowl and spoon as a token of their enormous appreciation. In 1843, they put him firmly in his (lower) social place. After all, he was only an innkeeper’s son, however hard he’d tried to earn his respectability. Thoroughly hurt, he resigned. And - after forty years, remember - they let him go.

With all that in mind, it becomes clear that the performance at the back of the room in this print is not the most important one. The real performers are front and centre, as intended: a nascent middle class membership anxious to present a serious image both to themselves and to the outside world. Remember, *they had their portraits painted*: no expense was spared in strengthening that tenuous grip on social respectability. It’s more than self-promotion: with political reform in the air, this print is a propaganda poster in the class war, every bit as manipulative in its intent as any carefully posed royal portrait [\[click for pics\]](#) up to and including the present day. Here, with all the trappings of nineteenth-century culture clearly on display in this print, we see the Canterbury Catch Club giving a masterclass in the performance of class.

Let’s end on a slightly more inclusive note - and bring the story very up to date in doing so. Simon McVeigh reminded us to “remember the music”. Well, my

⁸ *The Kentish Gazette*, 24 October 1843

research is concerned with remembering the musicians, and for the purposes of this paper, that includes everyone in the room you see in this print. They're not singing here, but when the artist wasn't looking, we know they did - and if those old prints, and that contemporary account, can be believed, they had a jolly good time of it. Goodness knows, they needed it: this was a generation facing many challenges. And as we list them, let's consider: how modern does this sound? In 19th-century Britain, political turbulence created a sense of ever-present threat to the established order of things; new technologies were profoundly affecting everyday life, with an accompanying loss of any sense of community; society was becoming increasingly secular, and established religions had no unified response, torn apart as they were with schisms of their own. Plus ça change... In the context of all that, the Catch Club may seem quaint, enclosed, naïve, and pointlessly irrelevant, but I wonder: perhaps their earnest attempts to create a close-knit community of their own, with a music which self-consciously shored up a sense of identity - cultural, national, whatever - and which crucially depended on members' lively participation for its vitality, can teach us something today, in our own time. Maybe we should try to re-learn the power of convivial music, for our generation. We might feel better for it. Thank you for your kind attention [\[click for closing music/video\]](#).